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Justice system reduces number of children in state care

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NEWS RELEASE

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JUSTICE SYSTEM REDUCES NUMBER OF CHILDREN IN STATE CARE

MISSOULA –

The number of children in Montana state care is down 17 percent from the year 2000, with more children exiting the system through both adoption and home placement. That's according to the 2008 Montana Kids Count Data Book published by The University of Montana's Bureau of Business and Economic Research.

This year's data book features an analysis of Montana's juvenile justice system and highlights the state's efforts to reform the system and improve outcomes for Montana youth entering it.

"Our goal was to expand people's understanding of what happens to youth entering the juvenile justice system and highlight through data and analysis the positive efforts being made in Montana," said Montana Kids Count Director Daphne Herling.

Two features of Montana's juvenile justice system have proved to be valuable in reducing the number of youth in custody across the state. They are the mandatory use of an assessment instrument for all youth placed on probation and the use of a Juvenile Court Assessment Tracking System, which identifies mental health needs. The system also aids in crafting customized case plans for each youth, with an emphasis on involving families in the process.

The data book explores American Indian child and maternal health in Montana, with a focus on examining the information needed to address public health problems for all of Montana's populations. An article within the data book showcases that without adequate information to assess the maternal health issues, existing disparities cannot be addressed through individualized programs.

The article also highlights measures that are in progress to increase awareness of strengths and weaknesses throughout populations to best increase outcomes for young women and children.

New to this year's book is the inclusion of information from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey, a national, school-based survey that monitors priority health-risk behaviors, including the prevalence of alcohol and tobacco use among youth in the state. The 2007 results show that 46.5 percent of youth drank alcohol in the last 12 months and 32.7 percent of youth engaged in binge drinking behavior.

This dataset provides information on youth risk behavior and is segmented by race. Therefore it offers insight on behavior among Montana's American Indian youth as well.

"Data provided for the total population can easily mask differences among the state's various sub-groups, in this case the differences between American Indian and white youth," said Thale Dillon, Montana Kids Count director of economic analysis. "With the YRBS dataset providing racial breakdowns, it offers a valuable tool to not only track behavioral changes over time, but also differences in these behaviors across groups as well."

Funded through the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Montana Kids Count program is a statewide effort to identify the status and well-being of Montana children by collecting data, providing analysis and publishing an annual data book. The data book highlights information regarding Montana's children and families at the state and county level in such areas as demographics, economic indicators, education, health and health insurance, safety and early childhood.

The book includes more than 100 indicators at the state level and more than 30 data items for each of Montana's 56 counties. This year's publication also reveals the following data facts regarding Montana's children and families:

Teen motor vehicle crashes decline

The number of motor vehicle crashes where the driver is under 18 has seen an impressive 27 percent decrease since 2000. Young drivers also decreased their share of total motor vehicle crashes.

Immunization rates decline

Immunization rates are down, sometimes dramatically, in 42 of Montana's counties, primarily because of changes in the definition of "fully immunized." Most recently the number of required inoculations increased when three doses of hepatitis B were added to the vaccination series.

Number of Montana's children declines

While Montana's population as a whole has seen a steady increase during the last several years, the number of children under 18 is going down. The decrease amounts to about 8,870 fewer children under 18 in the state since 2000. However, the number of children under 5 has increased by close to 4,540, suggesting a cyclical population pattern in the state.

The 2008 Montana Kids Count Data Book can be viewed online at <http://www.montanakidscount.org>. For more information call Montana Kids Count at 406-243-5113.

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